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## VISUAL ANTINOMY OF SACRED PERFECTION. *GINEVRA DE' BENCI'S MYSTERY* IN TARKOVSKY'S *MIRROR*

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The article examines the significance of Renaissance aesthetics for Andrei Tarkovsky and explores the functioning and semiotic effects of the Renaissance figurative model in the film *Mirror*. The study focuses on one of the least commented stills with a great symbolic significance – the “Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci” (or “Portrait of a Young Woman with a Juniper”) by Leonardo da Vinci. The author emphasizes the visual and semantic connection between Leonardo’s canvas and the image of the main character of the film, showing how the director creatively develops the mysterious connection between the two women from different times and cultures. On one hand, the inner world of the main heroine is reflected in Leonardo’s canvas. On the other hand, a certain view of the camera on Ginevra’s portrait and the lighting technique reveal the secret world of the spiritual evolution of the main character. Tarkovsky visually connects the biographical plot with the sacred themes of eternity, immortality, the antinomic perfection of man, and the salvation of the soul, using the symbolically rich Renaissance imagery created by Leonardo da Vinci.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics of cinema, art theory, Andrei Tarkovsky, Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, Ginevra de’ Benci, visual antinomy, sacred perfection.

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## ВИЗУАЛЬНАЯ АНТИНОМИЯ САКРАЛЬНОГО СОВЕРШЕНСТВА. ЗАГАДКА «ДЖИНЕВРЫ ДЕ БЕНЧИ» В «ЗЕРКАЛЕ» АНДРЕЯ ТАРКОВСКОГО

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В данной статье исследуется значение эстетики Возрождения для творчества Андрея Тарковского. На примере фильма «Зеркало» анализируются способы функционирования и семиотические эффекты ренессансной изобразительной модели. В центре внимания этого исследования находится один из кадров, который имеет большое символическое значение, но до сих пор мало комментируется, – «Портрет Джиневры де Бенчи» («Портрет молодой женщины с можжевельником») Леонардо

да Винчи. В статье установлена визуальная и смысловая связь между картиной Леонардо и образом главной героини фильма «Зеркало». Режиссёр творчески развивает идею таинственной связи женщин из разных эпох и разных культур: с одной стороны, внутренний мир главной героини фильма отражается и выражается в холсте Леонардо; с другой стороны, определённый взгляд кинокамеры на портрет Джиневры, приёмы освещения открывают внимательному зрителю тайный мир духовного становления главной героини. Тарковский визуально связывает биографический сюжет с сакральными темами вечности, бессмертия, антиномического совершенства человека, спасения души, пользуясь для этого символически богатым ренессансным образом, созданным Леонардо да Винчи.

**Ключевые слова:** герменевтика кино, теория искусства, Андрей Тарковский, искусство Ренессанса, Леонардо да Винчи, Джиневра де Бенчи, визуальная антиномия, сакральное совершенство.

Andrei Tarkovsky was creating his films, as he said himself, according to the compositional models of paintings. The compositional principles of Renaissance painting are especially noticeable in his work, notably in the films he made in his homeland. This is how the film *Mirror* was created: you have to look at this film like to a painting, the filmmaker said, emphasizing the secondary importance of the time axis of the film and the primacy of the compositional structure of the images-symbols. Nevertheless, the musical compositional model is also present in *Mirror*: this is how the rhythm of narration, and the sequence of figurative and sound symbols were conceived, for Tarkovsky always followed the principles of symphonicity in his films.

One of the principles of symphonicity is the use of the motif of doublets, that is, of double symbolic elements (objects, heroes, significant gestures, camera movements, editing techniques, musical themes). Their alternation in the narrative of the film creates the internal rhythm and the axis of spiritual evolution of the heroes, as well as the complex dialogue between symbols, which enter into subtle correspondences. These correspondences, especially in *Mirror*, create a unique symbolic organicity and refinement of the film, its spiritual and philosophical depth and beauty and an inexhaustible semantic richness.

The figurative painting model, mainly used in *Mirror*, was established by Andrei Tarkovsky together with his cinematographer Georgy Rerberg: the painting of the Renaissance and especially that of Leonardo da Vinci. Why exactly this way?

Andrei Tarkovsky does not explain this aesthetic principle, he simply postulates it. But we can suppose his choice was caused by the director's adherence, since his youth, to the art of Renaissance as to the peak of world culture, expressing in the best way his own philosophical, anthropological and aesthetic ideals, which are to inscribe the human being into eternity and eternity into the human being. Specifically, the aesthetics of Renaissance offered Tarkovsky the elements of cinematic language suitable to express the so-called "goal" of the film (as the director himself used to say). The role of the film *Mirror*, said the director on the

film premiere's eve, was to prove the immortality of his mother, to inscribe the main character of the film and thus to some extent people close to her into eternity: "I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that my mother will ever die. I will protest and shout that she is immortal. I want to convince others of her individuality and uniqueness. The internal premise from which I started was my desire to analyse her character in such a way as to prove her immortality" [Turovskaya 1989, 61].

Renaissance painting and Baroque music contribute in the best way to this goal. But how do exactly they work in *Mirror*? The film speaks about ordinary people of 20<sup>th</sup> century, who do not ask themselves too many questions about faith and do not have a clear idea about eternity. How can one inscribe their biographical story, set out like a mosaic, into eternity using the cinematic language? Narratively, Tarkovsky accomplishes this task by inscribing his heroes into the great history, which is read according to such keywords, like: collective suffering and self-sacrifice for homeland and humanistic ideals, patient enduring of the sufferings of the war and of the Stalinist regime, hope and heroism. These ideals are reflected by the selection of documentary newsreels of the Soviet and world history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, combined with moments of Tarkovsky's family chronicle, expressing, on their level, almost the same main themes.

On the level of the soundtrack, the inscribing of personal, family and world history into eternity is facilitated by the baroque music, evoking highest ideals, and by the off-screen commentary with Arseny Tarkovsky's poems, almost all speaking about eternity, life of the soul and higher humanistic values (like purity of love, courage, self-sacrifice). However, all these incarnations of highest ideals are subtle and are semantically sustained by the visual and audio registers of the film. Therefore, the visual palette of *Mirror* predominantly adopts motives, compositional and lighting techniques, and even concrete specific paintings of the Renaissance, especially from Leonardo da Vinci.

Leonardo da Vinci is the Russian filmmaker's favorite artist. Tarkovsky constantly uses da Vinci's works also in his other films (starting with *Solaris* and especially in the films produced outside USSR). One of the reasons of this artistic reverence is the specificity of Leonardo da Vinci's manner of painting, which is ideal for the audio-visual expression of the idea of infinity and of other metaphysical topics, like inscribing the human being into eternity and eternity into the human being. Therefore, all Tarkovsky's work, that is his so-called meta-film (in the Russian interpretation of this term), is based on the anthropologic and artistic model of Renaissance.

The Renaissance visual model is used by Tarkovsky in *Mirror* in the following ways:

– by constructing frame compositions according to some famous Renaissance canvases,

– by adopting compositional techniques of the Renaissance, especially *mise en abîme* – the most ancient artistic technique built on recursion, that is, the repetitive principle of reproducing or mirroring an object within oneself: "an image within the same image", "a film within a similar film", "a story within a

similar story” (in Russian traditional culture this technique is simply called “the matryoshka principle” – referring the famous Russian folk wooden painted dolls, placed one inside another, expressing the continuity of generations and infinity of life),

– by adopting visual techniques of lighting (*chiaroscuro*, *sfumato*) to the landscape compositions and portrait shots, techniques which are also associated with the concept of infinity (of the macro- and microcosmos) and with the idea of the mystery of the self (of the person) – principles belonging to the Renaissance philosophy,

– by quoting concrete referential canvases: classic landscapes (like the famous Bruegel’s winter), but especially portraits hinting at certain female characters of the film and suggesting their iconic *alter ego*, their image in eternity.



Fig. 1. Left: *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Johannes Vermeer, 1665.  
Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Right: The girl with a cracked lip. Still from *Mirror*.

The main Renaissance portrait, around which the heroines of the film are secretly gravitating (although it is not directly quoted in *Mirror*), is Johannes Vermeer’s “The Girl with a Pearl Earring” (the so-called “Dutch Mona Lisa”). This portrait is visually referenced by well-remembered frames and scenes of the film: rich doctor’s wife trying on turquoise earrings and the girl with a cracked lip in the so-called “Bruegel Winter Landscape” scene. The glance and elusive (simultaneously sensual and distracted) expression of this girl’s mouth remind us of the named Vermeer’s canvas (fig. 1).

But while the images and gestures reminding Vermeer’s “The Girl with a Pearl Earring” express the sublime hypostasis of the film’s heroines, that is the heavenly archetype of their spiritual evolution, Leonardo’s canvas “Ginevra de’ Benci” (fig. 2) is a disturbing and even shocking appearance through its direct non-diegetic quotation.



Fig. 2. *Ginevra de' Benci* by Leonardo da Vinci, 1474–1476.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

The shocking effect is emphasized by the sudden change of the soundtrack. Here the opera music is a short excerpt from the oratorio “Saint John Passion”. The fragment in that J. S. Bach puts in the mouth of St. John the Theologian St. Matthew’s apocalyptic verses (Matt. 27, 51–52) raises even more the threshold of the mystery. We should notice that in the original version of the film the text of the opera recitative, despite its obvious loudness and therefore emotional importance, did not have translated subtitles, which looked like a provocation for the usual Soviet spectator, who was unfamiliar and even unfriendly with German language. One could think that the avoiding of translating the Bible verse could have been motivated by censorship considerations, but the real reason seems to be deeper: this is not an ideological compromise for the approval of the film, but a strictly aesthetical choice.

In this light the portrait of the Florentine poetess expresses the mystery in its impenetrability and its deep ontological property: the ambiguity. Here is what Tarkovsky himself said about it: “The Portrait of a Young Woman with a Juniper by Leonardo da Vinci <...>. There is something in it that lies on the other side of good and evil <...>. In *Mirror* we will need this portrait in order to confront it with the heroine and to emphasize both in her and in the actress M. Terekhova, who plays the main role, the same ability to be charming and repulsive at the same time” [Terekhova 2002, 136] (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Margarita Terekhova in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*.

One important role of Renaissance painting in Tarkovsky's *Mirror* and perhaps the most important is the materialization of ambiguity. But how does this ambiguity work in the film? Structurally, ambiguity consists of an organic combination of opposites belonging to the same world or person and having the same right to exist. Internal contradictions characterize the real world on all its ontological levels. At the level of perfection, the internal so-called contradictions consist of unspoken antinomies that silently speak about the apophatism of the Perfect Being.

Tarkovsky proves his undeniable genius, as a master of ambiguity, as he is able to observe and conceive, maneuver, and recombine opposite attributes, easily and with subtle details, so that he is able to raise ambiguity from the status of formal mechanicism of opposite dualisms (such as Yin and Yang), opening to ambiguity the upper sphere of the antinomies of perfection. The director manages to do this with the same inspired skill with which Leonardo da Vinci distinguishes and recombines light and darkness, layers of transparency and color, shadows, and partial shade in the *sfumato* technique, directing all this sophisticated combination not towards speculative illusion<sup>1</sup>, but towards Heaven.

Among the performers of the film, the best one who expresses the state of ambiguity is Margarita Terekhova. In *Mirror*, the actress plays two roles: the role of Maria / Marusya (the Author's mother) and that of Natalia (the Author's wife). This becomes a reason for subtlest separations and recombinations of the two poles (positive and negative) of feminine ambiguity, according to fluid artistic

<sup>1</sup> As are doing the Dutch artist M. C. Escher and other art illusionists, but also some reputed filmmakers (like Alfred Hitchcock, Peter Greenaway, Lars von Trier and others).

criteria. At a first glance, this may serve as a pretext for Freudian interpretations (as happened in a considerable number of Western commentaries on the film), but this psychoanalytic approach leads to a dead end, because the film is not subject to the materialistic Freudian paradigm, but to deeper spiritual and anthropological principles. And, most importantly, by these combinations of symbols and archetypal polarities, the filmmaker aims to project his heroes and their lives into eternity, that is to iconize people and history.

Tarkovsky immortalizes the character of the Mother (Maria) through a mirror game with the image of the living heroine and an almost naïve allegorical painting, layering them one upon another in a complex alternation of time axis. This takes place in the scene after the flood in the old village kitchen. At the end of the mute semi-onyric scene, the main character – wet through Marusya (young Maria, played by Margarita Terekhova), wrapped in a white wooden shawl, looks at herself in an old mirror on the wardrobe door, and in the mirror image she sees not herself, but Maria Vishnyakova, that is her (Marusya's) elderly hypostasis. How does this visually happen?



Fig. 4. Old Maria in the mystical mirror. Still from *Mirror*.

Maria Vishnyakova – Andrei Tarkovsky's mother, and in the film the mother of the Author, approaches the mirror, in which one can see the reflection of an allegorical landscape with a tree (let us call it the "Tree of Life"), with a sky and clouds (fig. 4). A small fire is flaming in front of the tree, but the fire is not painted on the canvas: it is just a reflection of the flaming kitchen stove, which burned strongly and dangerously in the previous scene (of the hair washing), as if the flame of the kitchen stove and its mirror reflection burned Marusya alive. But now the fire calmed down. Initially a feral fire, devouring the heroine through family quarrels and the sufferings of the war, now calms down and quietly

warms the “tree” of Marusya’s life, like a vigil lamp or the flame of a prayer. And indeed, in the next scene of the warming of hands at an ignited splinter in the night, the close palms resemble the gesture of a prayer, as if the children’s palms were embracing the sacred fire of supplication.

Sending into the future the image of Author’s mother (visually, through her mirror reflection), Tarkovsky overlaps on this image the miniature fire of prayer and the little “tree of life”. In the cinema language it means the immortalization of Mother, her heavenly glorification through the reflected play of the film characters and through Renaissance paintings, everyday life, and the sphere of world culture, inscribing through mirroring effects one ontological level into another.

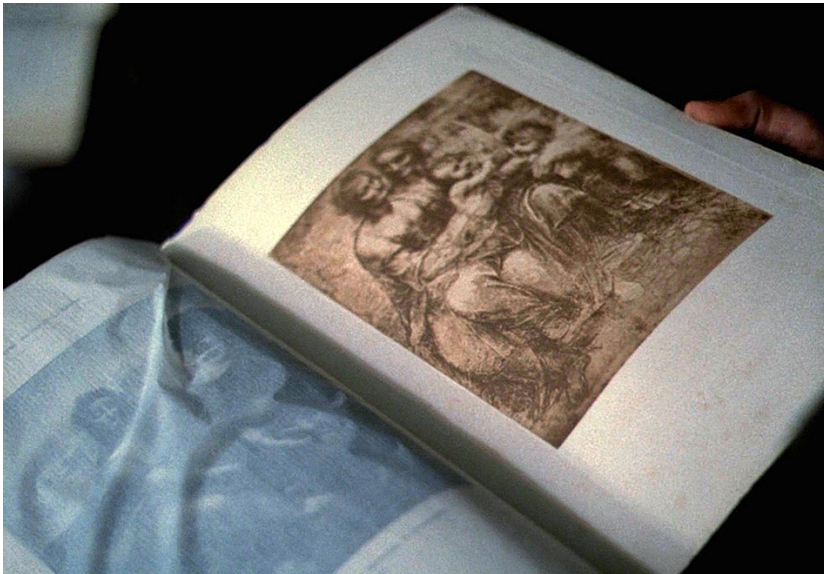


Fig. 5. Album. Still from *Mirror*.

Out of all the Renaissance paintings used in the film, those of Leonardo da Vinci work most effectively. Approximately at the end of the first third of the film, after the newsreel with the rise of the Soviet stratospheric balloon, commented by Pergolesi’s celestial music, we see the scene where teenager Alexey flips through the Renaissance prints album (fig. 5). The gaze of the camera stops especially on the works of Leonardo da Vinci: secular portraits and sketches for religious compositions; the scene is accompanied by the sublime music of J. S. Bach. The flipping scene ends on an engraving with sketches of palms joined in prayer. The longest gaze of the camera stops on them, defining thus the meaning of the scene: the Olympian, supermundane peace of the Spirit, as a response to earthly tragedies and suffering, evoked by the previous historical newsreels (few people know that the rise of the first Soviet stratospheric balloon ended tragically). The flipping through the engravings album, one of the most memorable scenes of the film, symbolically connects, like in a polyphonic dialogue, with many syntactic elements of the film.



The scene with the album is followed by a family everyday episode, where Ignat pricks his finger and tells his mother that this has happened to him once before – a hint at the mirroring of history or at its repeatability and at the multilayered structure of reality. The scene continues with the mysterious visiting of Ignat by guests from the future, including Ignat's grandmother (aka Maria Vishnyakova), whom Ignat does not recognize, and only by the end of the scene (known as "the reading of Chaadaev's letter to Pushkin") the boy realizes that something supernatural has happened in his house.

All this is symbolically connected with the interweaving of the theme of historical newsreels with the themes from Pergolesi's and Bach's music and from the Renaissance engravings: the expansion of individual consciousness to a wider, universal scale of all mankind. However, if all the works of Leonardo from *Mirror* are evoking eternity and the expansion of human consciousness, Ginevra de' Benci's portrait plays a narrower or more punctual role, more precisely, the role of a semantic accent. The Florentine poetess' portrait is closely associated with the images of the main female characters, Maria and Natalia, especially with the prototype of Natalia. This Leonardo's canvas is much more difficult to remember in the film because it appears only once (which is not typical for Tarkovsky's significant frames and scenes, which usually function in doublets) and lasts relatively short (about 15 seconds, which is short enough for the average duration of Tarkovsky's shots).

Rarely in Tarkovsky's movies and in any grammatically correctly constructed films significant images appear only once. Most often, the main cinematic motives function in doublets (double appearances), thus strengthening their presence in the symbolic world of the film and firmly inscribing themselves into the drama. This is a general law of film composition, valid not only for Tarkovsky. In his movies, especially in *Mirror*, the function of the doublet motifs is very carefully and subtly developed. Therefore, the unique appearance of Ginevra's portrait indicates that its function is closer to a semantic accent, albeit very mysterious and strong, than to a main significant motive, firmly embedded in the dramaturgy of the film. What does this accent consist of?

According to the chronological axis of the narrative, Ginevra's portrait appears between the touching scene of father's return from the war, when he embraces his children in the forest, and the scene of Natalia's second quarrel with her husband, which belongs to the time axis of the seventies, that is the present time of the film. The family quarrel scene, filmed in black and white, begins with Natalia's close-up sitting against the light in a dim, diagonal lighting from bottom to top, and is preceded by the mysterious portrait of Ginevra. The bottom-up illumination is unnatural; this lighting technique is specific for the horror genre, and it is charged by Tarkovsky with a fairly clear psychological meaning. In the same way Marusya (also aka Terekhova) was filmed in the scene of the cock's beheading in the village house, which is also a moment with discrete horror connotations (as Tarkovsky himself declared). This manner of lighting emphasizes Natalia's nervousness, her anxiety and spiritual disharmony, caused by her inner rebellion. And all this disharmony enters into a secret but strong correlation with the Olympian coldness of Ginevra's lunar-pale portrait. The impenetrable, cold,

and extremely ambiguous face of the Florentine lady is visually correlated with Natalia's sour air from the scene of the family quarrel.



Fig. 6. A spot of blue light. Still from *Mirror*.

The troublous passage from "Saint John Passion", begun at the end of the scene with father's return and continued until Ginevra's close-up, amplifies the shock and the mystery. In the fragment of the oratorio J. S. Bach quotes the words of Evangelist Matthew about the death and Resurrection of Christ: "*Und die Erde erbebete, und die Felsen zerrissen, die Gräber taten sich auf, und standen auf viele Leiber der Heiligen*" [And the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose] (Matt. 27, 51–53) [Kononenko 2011, 249]. The tenor's disturbing syncopal voice seems at first to express the emotion of the children, meeting their long-awaited father (their tears and anxious faces confirm this). But the role of the tenor's voice changes in the next insert, where it obviously undermines Ginevra's Olympian serenity, forcing the audience to attentively peer at the famous Leonardo's canvas.

But immediately after the "musical aggression" over the painting Tarkovsky "consoles" Ginevra with a spot of blue light (fig. 6). As the camera passes over the details of the canvas, a faint spot of bluish color appears, moving along the same contour with the camera, like a lighting and magnifying device that discovers and highlights a fragile tree trunk in the background of the canvas – an element of nature that also participated in the "glorification" of Maria, as if a gentle moonlight spot conciliates Ginevra's cold and also moonlike appearance. Reputable analysts (the first of which is, chronologically, Natasha Synessios) also noticed the similarity between Ginevra and Natalia [Synessios 2001]. Thus, the vague circle of blue color, revitalizing Ginevra's portrait and illuminating her tiny "tree of life" (fig. 7), can symbolize functions like a discreet blessing sent to Natalia, perpetuating, and existentially orienting the confused heroine, who has not yet found her terrestrial path and archetypal image.



Fig. 7. *Ginevra de' Benci* by Leonardo da Vinci, 1474–1476. Detail.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

Therefore, the portrait of Ginevra expresses the ambiguity inherent to both heroines, interpreted by Margarita Terekhova. In the order of the dichotomies from the film, as we already mentioned, there is a doublet relationship (like Yin–Yang) between Maria and Natalia, concretized in two aspects: the formal similarity between the two women up to their formal identification, and a certain complementarity. Maria, who had accepted the trials of fate with dignity and without grumbling (the sufferings of the war and of the Stalinist regime), wins a moral victory grace to her patience and devotion, and therefore is worthy of “iconic exaltation”. By the other hand, rebellious Natalya is passing through the hardest ordeal of her life (the divorce), which she does not clearly understand; she is still going through her personal hell. And exactly on the bottom of this “hell” (the hell of family quarrels and lack of inner orientation), the light spot on Ginevra’s portrait offers a ray of hope – to whom? – to the heroine with whom Ginevra is symbolically closely associated, that is Natalia.

So we can say – and this analysis is just one of the many proofs for this – that the secret principles of Tarkovsky’s cinematic language are similar to the general laws of symbolic language and particularly to the principles of sympathetic magic. Of course, they are used by the filmmaker according to his genius intuition and artistic intelligence, and not mechanically, according to some hidden artistic handbooks and recipes, or by copying some occult alchemical algorithms.

In the order of the doublet relationship between the two heroines, Maria's steady "cinematic immortalization" should be put into correspondence with at least a modest "glorification" of Natalia. These cinematic projections of the two heroines into eternity are not identical, for the two women are at different stages of their spiritual formation and have different narrative functions in the film. Maria's "cinematic immortalization" is almost explicit and firmly semantically grounded, while Natalia's "exaltation" is discreet and barely tangible. Nevertheless, through his cinematic language, Tarkovsky offers to each of them the chance for "heavenly exaltation", drawing the narrative frames for the "salvation" of their souls.

This is exactly what means "to sanctify" or "to consecrate" the cinematic image by developing a unique cinematic language, capable to effectively operate in the sphere of the sacred. Tarkovsky gives us this lesson in the highest degree, that is on the level of the perfect organicity between film, life, and transcendence.

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